DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 304 899 FL 017 856

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TITLE "Whar You From?": Teaching Cultural Differences in the Business Communication Classroom.
PUB DATE Apr 88
NOTE 9p.; In: Proceedings of the Seventh Annual Eastern Michigan University Conference on Languages for Business and the Professions (see FL 017 839).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; Classroom Techniques; *Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Differences; Cultural Images; Discussion (Teaching Technique); Higher Education; *Intercultural Communication; *Perspective Taking; Role Perception; Role Playing; Stereotypes; *Student Attitudes

ABSTRACT

One of the most difficult tasks business and professional communication teachers face is teaching students to appreciate cultural differences and their effects on business communication, both domestically and internationally. Students from a homogeneous background may dismiss or disparage cultural differences. Some classroom exercises can help give students a sense of other cultures, including a view of their own culture as "other." One exercise has students speculate aloud about customs and manners of other parts of the country and about the origins of their opinions. Students then assume the roles of people from different parts of the country, and finally, list three stereotypes about the people they love that they do not want others to have. A second exercise has students compare cultural differences with differences among executives and executive levels in any organization, including a comparison between themselves and their bosses. This addresses the role of power in relationships. Students then discuss ways they have seen American culture transferred to other cultures. The third exercise has students research other countries and businesses. Students then role-play a brief intercultural meeting. These exercises help reduce student provincialism and heighten cultural awareness. (MSE)

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ED304899

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"WHAR YOU FROM?": TEACHING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE BUSINESS COMMUNICATION CLASSROOM

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"Whar You From?": Teaching Cultural Differences in the Business Communication Classroom

In the movie Dog Day Afternoon, Al Pacino asks his partner in crime what country he would like to escape to. The partner replies, "Wyoming." This response is not unlike that many business and professional communication instructors receive when they approach their students with the idea of an international business community. Many students, especially those who are first-generation college students or who are not especially well-traveled, may see the world as consisting of three parts: home, the rest of the United States, and the rest of the world. One of the most difficult teaching tasks business and professional communication professors face is instructing these students on the importance of appreciating cultural differences and their effect on business communication both nationally and globally. If Wyoming is not a foreign country, Japan, Mexico, and Germany certainly are--and for some of our students, the Asian-American executive raised in Wyoming would be as "foreign" as the German executive who can trace her ancestry back for generation to generation.

When students are from an essentially homogeneous background where cultural differences are few, they are apt to dismiss or even disparage cultural differences both inter-country and intra-country in nature. With the increasing importance of international communication and the large number of business and professional people who are not white, male, and country club members in good standing, students need to be taught that just because it was

not made in Akron, Waycross, or Des Moines does not mean it is inferior. The purpose of this paper is to describe a series of inter-connected exercises that gives students a sense of other cultures--including a view of their own culture as "other."

First Exercise

I have students speculate out loud about customs and manners of other parts of the country. Two things prove helpful here: my own background as a southerner and the significant influence of television. I first ask students to describe what their perceptions of southerners are and where they got them from. (Of course, an instructor from any part of the country who finds himself or herself in a different one can play this game.) This request leads to a great deal of good-natured ribbing as a number of Akronites can trace their roots to the rocky soil of West Virginia. Comments about hillbillies, hicks, cars on blocks, grits, and so on abound, as you might expect.

The students grow pensive when I ask them how they formed their opinions; while some of them blame relatives--which I encourage!--most admit that they learned about southerners from television and cite The Dukes of Hazard as the primary culprit, with various television movies and sit-coms coming in for their share of guilt. The discussion then moves to how others might regard people from Ohio in general and northern Ohio specifically. Again, this is easily adapted to almost any part of the country. Students talk about the negative impact stories on the troubled economy of the region might have on viewers and newspaper readers; they also talk about how rural people in Ohio have always been regarded as hicks. While the discussion is generally light, the students are beginning to understand how various cultural transmitters can distort the truth, to put it kindly, and create unfair portraits which nonetheless influence opinion, no matter how unfairly.

I then have students assume roles of people from different parts of the country. Certainly, this leads to a great deal of good-humored sport, but students realize two things from this role-playing: they realize how differences, no matter exaggerated, do exist and affect communication, and they also realize they can respect those differences. for this part of the exercise, I may have a student enact, say him or her conception of an Hispanic businessman used to--and insistent upon--a leisurely lunch or a part-time homemaker who must rush--yes, RUSH--to pick up her (or his) child from day care and who has no time for lunch at all. In these roles which they write out first, students assume what they believe are the manners and mores of people from other cultural backgrounds, and while the effect is often sweetly comical, the lesson is not: other cultures exist right here and, just as the students themselves might be perceived as foreign, so do they perceive others. I end this first exercise by having students list three stereotypes about the people they love they do not want others to have. The discussion of this segment is especially interesting when minority students contribute--loudly.

Second Exercise

I next have students compare cultural differences with the differences among executives and executive levels in any organization. I introduce this segment by explaining that I am an assistant professor and that I do not have the same power or authority as a full professor. I provide examples, too! Again, the students are amused, but they grow more serious as I ask them to jot down the differences between their bosses and themselves at their jobs, or the differences between their professors and themselves.

To be sure, hierarchy has a great deal to do with different behaviors, but students, with encouragement, expand their discussion to include the cultural differences between being boss and worker--and how those roles are

reinterpreted when the boss in turn reports to his or her boss. I finally ask students to begin creating their own definition of the word "culture." Not only do words such as "manners," "race," "religion," and "money," come into play, as do the more expected ones such as "art" and "music," but students begin to include "power" in their definition as well.

This leads to what I believe is the most interesting part of our exploration: what does power have to do with our relationships with other peoples and other cultures? Students then tentatively explore the military and economic roles of the United States and how these do or do not affect their relationships with people from those other cultures. Admittedly, the discussion is no threat to the political science seminars at Harvard,and the students' knowledge of history proves to be sketchier than is comforting, but the point is made: they learn from their talk that the use or abuse of strength is a powerful cultural factor.

Students next discuss ways they have seen American culture and language transferred to other cultures. With the recently emergent economic power of some Asian countries, students usually wonder out loud to what extend such influences will alter "our" culture. The ensuing exchange points up the obvious: that "their" culture is already here. But to these largely white or black students, a consciousness of what constitutes culture and power--and of those things are affected and affect power--is a new consciousness. One of the best recent examples is the "reverse" discrimination of Asian-American students in some better universities that, seeking to maintain a racial "balance," turn down qualified Asian Americans for less qualified white students. When this is brought up, the discussion of culture, power, and the students' own lives gets quite heated and far-ranging. No matter how far it goes, however, the discussion does return to the central issue: cultural

differences and the professions. By now, what the students thought was going to be quaint exercise about quaint "other" people has in fact proved to challenge some of their basic assumptions about other cultures int he United States as well as their own.

Third Exercise

I conclude this unit by having students research other countries and businesses. In addition to providing valuable library experience for them, this final exercise also promotes a healthy respect for other cultures.

For example, most students respect, say, the economic power of SONY but would have no idea how to handle a meeting with a Japanese businessman. By researching in a variety of sources, determining what would be proper behavior on such an occasion, students learn that economic respect and/or fear need not serve as the only basis for a relationship. While some of the women in the class may be horrified by what they perceive as the terrible conditions of women in Japan and other cultures, for example, they nonetheless come to understand that in a business meeting, it is perhaps less their job to question another culture's values than to understand the dynamics at work, to the degree that they can.

In addition to being surprised and/or dismayed by some of the information they unearth, students also come across contradictory information. One source may tell them that a German businessman will expect to discuss his family a great deal during the course of a meeting, while another might say that a "typical" German would not do such a thing, but you can expect it of a Frenchman, and so on. This disturbs them at first, but they soon learn to sift the information and rely on what they most commonly find in the better sources. Thus, students not only learn about customs and other cultures, but

they also develop and refine some significant research techniques that will serve them in the future.

Once students have some ideas of the manners of other cultures, they role play a brief meeting between, say, a Nigerian student and a college dean or a businessman from Malaysia. The results offer no threat to the Yale Drama Department and awkwardness abounds. Yet the role-play makes students realize that if they have trouble assuming the manners of another people, surely those people must have some difficulty when they come to the United States and/or encounter Americans. When the students explore such issues as body space, conversational customs, and the treatment of women as these matters connect to business, they realize that culture consists of something more than which rock group is big this year and how you wear your hair.

Conclusion

While the three preceding exercises offer merely an introduction to world business, they are nonetheless valuable--I hope--in ridding students of at least some of their provincialism. Of course, not all students need this kind of purge, but many students--dare I say many American students?--need to know the world is not bordered by Los Angeles and Fort Lauderdale. In recognizing the connections between the cultural expectations they have of each other and those they have of their own work places and schools, students realize they already move successfully among different cultures. To adapt this mobility they simply must learn, and make greater effort to learn, the varied cultural expectations of so-called "foreign peoples." The various role-plays and research efforts required in these exercises serve to heighten student awareness that not everyone in the world--or even down the street--is of their own culture.

Once students possess this knowledge, the instructor can then take advantage of it in other ways. For instance, students may then be reminded that the so-called Standard American English they must use in business communication is in fact simply a cultural compromise hammered out--and being hammered out even now--by different people trying to communicate. Instructors might also want to point out other issues in business that are culturally determined: child care for working parents, promotions for women and minorities--and that hangman's noose known as the necktie. Whether the concern is over the proper bow in Japan or the proper knot in Cleveland, there are few students who do not need to be reminded that the way we do it in America is not the only way to do it in the world.